

Anil Bordia

Testing the Limits of the System

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Anil Bordia was a civil servant who was passionate about taking education to the masses and making every Indian literate. In this endeavour, he roped in academicians, activists, journalists and educationists who would otherwise have maintained a distance from “government work”. He worked within the system to change it and subvert its regressive tendencies.

It is uncommon to find an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer being described as a “champion of education and an activist civil servant”. Yet, this is the description that best explains Anil Bordia’s life and work. Bordia passed away on the night of 2 September at the age of 79.

I first met Bordiaji in the summer of 1977 at Seva Mandir in Udaipur. *Bhaisaheb* (the late Mohan Singh Mehta) introduced us; I was doing my fieldwork in southern Rajasthan then. He asked me to meet him in Delhi to discuss the new adult education programme that was being launched – the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP). Following extensive discussions with many of us on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which had just been released, he decided to introduce the principles of awareness raising in this first national programme of adult education. He ensured that innovations in participatory training methodology and production of critical learning materials for literacy and adult education were mainstreamed in the NAEP. He also encouraged the large-scale involvement of voluntary agencies in the implementation of this programme. These steps were very risky then, but he followed them up with great enthusiasm.

Over the 1980s, Bordiaji’s name became synonymous with innovations in education; he was instrumental in crafting the Bihar Education Project which attempted to combine formal and non-formal approaches to learning for children and adolescents. His efforts also led to the Mahila Samakhyas being launched in Rajasthan (and then in other states) as an educational programme to empower rural women. This was the first government programme where only women activists (they were called *sathins*) were encouraged to be the educators on such a large scale.

He was able to identify creative and passionate people, and bring them in to work with government; a large number of educators, trainers, researchers, activists and artists from the voluntary sector, who had no experience of or interest in “serving” in the government, suddenly found themselves persuaded to do so by Bordia. His office always used to have a wide variety of people at lunch time; once I asked him why he “fed” lunch to so many of us every day. He smiled mysteriously and said “because I want to know what is going on”. His channels of communication and feedback from the grass roots, outside the official channels of communication, were alive, vibrant and authentic; he used this knowledge to influence the system to change its regressive procedures and practices.

Activists, educationists and grass-roots workers found in him an ally. Whenever workers at the district level faced harassment or intimidation, Bordiaji was the first “port of call”. He would listen, and act quietly. He had the amazing ability to work within the system, to work to change the system, and to use the system to subvert itself.

The most significant period of his career was as education secretary in the Government of India during 1987-92. The review of the education policy had been launched in late 1985 and major conversations had begun to take place around the new directions that the education policy should veer towards in 1986. Bordiaji invited a wide cross-section of opinions and people to engage with this new formulation. Disagreements were voiced openly; criticisms were listened to. He thus enabled one of the first multi-stakeholder dialogues on the national education policy.

Many of us disagreed with his suggestions to promote para-teachers in rural areas since regular government teachers were not performing their duties. Absenteeism of teachers in primary schools was a serious problem then as well. The teachers were organised into powerful unions and their support was crucial in mobilising votes during elections. Obviously, the Congress Party did not want to take on the teachers’ lobby on issues of absenteeism. The scheme of “shiksha

karmi” was introduced, first in Rajasthan, and then across many states. In the past decade, the same approach of para-teachers has been extended to panchayats, because government-appointed primary schoolteachers refuse to be accountable to the panchayati raj bodies. Today, the Twelfth Plan is emphasising quality in education and the capacity, motivation and accountability of teachers are the most significant contributors to quality of learning. The negative perception of para-teachers by parents and the continued absence of primary school teachers are the twin reasons why even the rural poor are sending their children (at least one boy, if that is all they can afford) to private primary schools in large numbers.

Another area of educational expansion that Bordiaji encouraged was that of literacy. The NAEP had been summarily disbanded by the new government when Indira Gandhi came back to power in 1980. All literacy centres under the NAEP, being run by hundreds of voluntary organisations throughout the country, were told to stop functioning through a telegram from Delhi. Mission-mode of programming became popular during the reign of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1985. Like other such programmes the National Literacy Mission (NLM) was launched under the “guidance” of Sam Pitroda in 1988. The initial design of this mission was based on Bordiaji’s experiences of the NAEP in the period between 1977 and 1980. He enabled a large number of voluntary organisations, academic institutions and state resource centres to get resources from the government to pursue the goals of achieving full literacy in the country by the year 2000 under this mission.

The Scene Changer

UNESCO had declared 1990 as the International Literacy Year. Bordiaji was very active at the international levels, both in the official UNESCO mechanisms as well as in non-governmental, unofficial mechanisms like the International Council for Adult Education. He carried his domestic style to the international arenas as well. By that time, the World Bank had begun to focus its attention on basic education;

it partnered with the UNESCO, the United Nations Children’s Education Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to convene a global conference on Education for All in Jomtein, Thailand in April 1990. In preparation for this conference, regional consultations were being held. Bordiaji was leading the south Asian process, which had been reasonably inclusive of several non-official stakeholders too. I recall that a debate occurred in the preparatory meeting being held in Dhaka in late 1989 around the primacy of literacy in the Education For All (EFA). Some of us argued then that EFA will not be realised in countries like India (and much of south Asia) if literacy for all was not aimed for simultaneously. Several non-officials contested that their perspectives and voices were being “drowned” in the official din. In a quick response, Bordiaji stepped down as chair of that discussion, and asked me to facilitate it thereafter. Suddenly, the atmosphere in the room changed, discussions became more respectful, all voices felt included, and Dhaka produced an excellent declaration. This was vintage Anil Bordia: take a risk, invite others to engage, and believe that the outcome will be better than otherwise.

The NLM changed its strategy after an experiment in the Kottayam and Ernakulam districts of Kerala showed great results through a mass campaign. By the end of 1989, the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) became the model for all literacy work in the country. Obviously, Bordiaji was persuaded by gains in Kerala to agree to this approach being adopted. However, it was forgotten that the model was developed in districts which already had a literacy rate of more than 80%. The “mop-up” operations in those Kerala districts with the help of

educated volunteers as instructors could not be replicated in the BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) belt where the prevalent literacy rates were below 25%. As educated volunteers were not available in these districts, it was proposed that primary school teachers should be mobilised. Some of us questioned the logic of this suggestion since illiteracy in these districts in the early 1990s was a direct consequence of the failure of the primary school system (and the teachers). Wherever these teachers got involved, the schooling of the children concerned was affected. The evidence showed that what was achieved on a large scale was learning to sign one’s name so that these people were no longer *angootha chhap* (“thumb print”) literate.

Literacy went off the government’s agenda in the Ninth and Tenth Plans. Though “Sakhshara Bharat” has been launched in 2009, India is home to nearly half the illiterates of the world (about 400 million) still.

Post-Retirement Commitment

Bordiaji’s passion for non-formal and lifelong education continued after his retirement from service; he launched the Lok Jumbish initiative in Rajasthan to focus on adolescent youths and later the Doosra Dashak in 2000 to focus on the education of girls and boys. His passion for education as a vehicle for empowerment and justice was far stronger than what the government machinery could handle. But he continued to test the limits of that system, while maintaining extensive relations and support outside.

Anil Bordia will continue to be remembered as a visionary educationist and a champion for literacy, non-formal education and lifelong learning, for all.

NEW

Web Exclusives

EPW has introduced a new section, “Web Exclusives” on its new and improved website (<http://www.epw.in>).

This section will feature articles written exclusively for the web edition and will normally not appear in the print edition. All visitors to the website can read these short articles written mainly on current affairs.

Readers of the print edition are encouraged to visit the EPW website and read these web exclusives which will see new articles every week.